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ABSTRACT

This paper defines censorship, provides a brief historical review of book censorship throughout history, and delineates the issues and problems involved in establishing an effective relationship between school and community with regard to book selection and evaluation. Guidelines, designed to prevent censorship crises before they occur, are presented for use by community college teachers and administrators. The paper also describes a course devoted to the study of academic freedom and censorship, which can provide an opportunity for students to examine the nature and function of language, to explore the semantic problems of definitions, and to look carefully at the total communication problem. Literature recommended for this course includes such works as Ray Bradbury's "Farenheit 451," George Orwell's "1984," and John Milton's "Areopagitica." A citizen's request form for reevaluation of books is provided. (KS)

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CENSORSHIP AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

On February 9, 1977 The Atlanta Journal carried a news story on the conviction of Larry Flynt, publisher of the men's magazine Hustler, for pandering obscenity and for engaging in organized crime. I am not a regular reader of this publication, and possibly many of you aren't; but that is not the point. This case is significant in that it is a test of whether or not a community can dictate obscenity standards. This is but one of many extremely important aspects of the censorship issue that is of personal and professional concern to all of us here today. I have read widely and have thought extensively about this topic, and in the time we have together I wish to share some observations and reflections.

It is customary in situations such as this to define key terms where appropriate. Censorship itself is probably the easiest to define, for it relates to the act of suppressing, excising, withholding, or otherwise removing materials, words, ideas, and the like from the presence of those whose well-being might presumably be affected by exposure to same. The Supreme Court has called this protecting "the weak, the uninformed, the

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unsuspecting, and the gullible." Acts of censorship occur for moral, political, military, racial, religious, economic, social, and possible other reasons--though I think I've touched on those most familiar.

Beyond this the terms become more difficult, more elusive; some of the most troublesome are obscene, pornographic, profanity, un-American, un-Christian, racist, sexist--and, of course, community, as in community standards. I could cite dictionary and even legalistic definitions for most of these, but I think you can see the obvious problems here.

Robert F. Hogan, Executive Secretary of the National Council of Teachers of English, has addressed the problem of defining obscenity in this manner:

> It is impossible to establish the fact of "obscenity" by content analysis. Nothing is more certainly in the eye of the beholder than "offensiveness." The eye of the mind is as subject to myopia, astigmatism, and cataract as the eye of the body. The same exposed mammary gland may induce erotic thoughts in a male adolescent, feelings of inadequacy in a female adolescent, clinical disinterest in a gynecologist, and hunger pains in an infant. Indeed, in Minnesota some years ago a panel holding hearings on a proposed obscenity statute was offered a series of exhibits to test whether agreement about obscenity was possible. Seeing a close-up photograph of an exposed breast, the panel agreed it was obscene. The photograph displayed, it turned out, had been cropped from a larger picture, a picture of Johnny Weissmuller.

("Censorship Cases May Increase," English Journal, January 1974, "For the Members" insert, p. 2.)

Mr. Hogan's discussion of the problems of defining "community" includes a reminder from Census figures that in 1970 alone one-fifth of the American population changed residences. Drake, South Dakota, where in 1973 Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughter-house Five was condemned and burned, may be closer to one's notion of community with its population of 650 "strongly religious, strongly conservative" people than the city or town each of us calls home. But what is "community"? Is New York City or Charlotte or Richmond any more or less a community than your subdivision or your street or your family? Or in a court case, can any group of twelve jurors be truly representative of local community standards? I have very serious doubts.

To be a bit more personal, I do not care to entrust any assortment of citizens from my community with the decision as to what I may read or view insofar as that reading or viewing harms no one. I will admit at times to having been weak of flesh and of spirit, of having been uninformed and unsuspecting, and even of having been gullible on occasion. Yet who among us hasn't? As a mature, intelligent adult, I must say "No, thank you" to those who, for whatever reasons, would legislate morality and make my choices for me.

To be less personal, let me say that to remove First Amendment protection for so-called patently offensive materials supposedly appealing to prurient interests and lacking "serious"

literary, artistic, political, or scientific value is to open the gates to endless litigation as states and local communities attempt to resolve that awesome task of defining which books, periodicals, films, etc. are lacking serious value.

Censorship in some form has probably always existed. The works of Confucius were among books burned by a Chinese ruler in the second century B.C. The destruction of the great library at Alexandria began with a book burning by Julius Caesar and continued over several centuries until 642 when the Arabs who conquered that city destroyed books opposed to the teachings of the Koran. The Roman Church in the fourth century A.D. censored books in Carthage not in keeping with church doctrine. Thus, early censorship seems to have been more political and religious in nature.

Imagine the fate of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, for example, had literature in earlier times come under the kinds of laws which over the past two hundred years have focused on matters sexual. The efforts of Anthony Comstock in this country and Dr. Thomas Bowdler in England are illustrations of personal crusading too familiar to discuss in detail here. And let us not forget that Noah Webster prepared an expurgated edition of the Bible, parts of which he thought unfit to be read by the family or from the pulpit.

By way of summing up this very brief historical glance at censorship, I share with you these thoughts from Peter Jennison's little book, Freedom to Read (New York, 1963):

> Whatever the attitude or approach, general agreement can be reached in at least three respects: (1) there are no easy answers or ready solutions to this knotty question; (2) books do not stay banned--the works of Rabelais and Galileo, Dante and Voltaire, Darwin and Mark Twain, Margaret Sanger and D.H. Lawrence have outlived generations of censors; and (3) censorship is a universal cultural manifestation as old as the first graphic representation of human utterance and as young as tomorrow's news. (p. 3)

To repeat, books do not stay banned. Ideas persist. Individual liberties will not remain long suppressed. Why, then, do we continue to have censorship problems? I want to say it's human nature, but at the moment you might consider that an insipid response.

I wonder what the school children of Kanawha County and Charleston, West Virginia will think and feel years from now about the violence and disruption in 1974 over the textbook controversy in that community. Would they have become within ten years, as the Citizens Review Committee which opposed the textbook adoptions charged,

--a generation without faith--in God, marriage, family, and country?

--a generation with a negative and morbid outlook on life, hardened to murder, torture, and the macabre?

--a generation of high school graduates who can't read, spell, write, compute as well as former grade school students?

--a generation who would not resist an aggressor?

Many thought so should those students be exposed to such authors as e.e. cummings, Gwendoyn Brooks, Allen Ginsberg, as well as Plato, John Milton, and Ernest Hemingway. Essentially, the school system was following a state regulation requiring that texts reflect racial, religious, and cultural pluralism. What evolved among the protesters were two ideologies, one arguing that the materials in question were anti-religious, the other insisting that school materials should contain no reference to religion.

There are many notions as to what really happened in Kanawha County. One view, that of the United Methodist Bishop of Charleston, D. Frederick Wertz, strikes a familiar chord:

> Perhaps the controversy over textbooks is only the itch which has caused us to scratch, symptomatic of problems that are more than skin deep. For many of the people who live outside the city limits, there is a sense of powerlessness born of the absence of an adequate voice to influence the decision-making process. It is more than an economic or cultural gap. It is a feeling of being voiceless and powerless. For some the books became a trumpet for voiceless people, and the protest became an instrument in the hands of powerless people. (Quoted in John Berger, "Report from Kanawha," CSSEDC Newsletter, January 1975, p. 5.)

Another view, that of Thelma Conley, an English language arts

curriculum specialist in Kanawha County, is that the basic issue was racism. Whatever the causes, the wounds of this censorship controversy will be a long time healing.

I could cite quite a lengthy list of books that have drawn the censor's attention throughout our nation. Many you would readily recognize: Orwell's 1984, Huxley's Brave New World, Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, Heller's Catch-22, Hesse's Siddhartha, Cleaver's Soul on Ice, Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye, Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird, Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land, Updike's Rabbit, Run, Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls, Melville's Moby Dick. Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. There are some titles that might surprise you:

Jonathan Livingston Seagull - "overtones of reincarnation"

Silas Marner - "You can't prove what that dirty old man is doing with that child between chapters."

Good Morning, Miss Dove - "the woodcuts of the dove are proof positive of the influence of the international Communist conspiracy"

Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire - "anti-Catholic"

The Hobbitt - "subversive elements"

Girl Scout Handbook - "un-American"

Gone With the Wind - "Scarlett's immorality"

Crime and Punishment - "written by a Russian"

There are more, but the vision you should be getting at this point is one of the basic assumptions of censorship: namely, that any book, magazine, film, idea, or work of art is

subject to censorship by someone, somewhere at some time for any number of reasons. Kenneth L. Donelson, who has written widely on censorship and its impact on the teaching of English, reminds us of additional assumptions:

1. New books or ideas or teaching methods are more likely to be censored than anything hallowed by time. . .
2. Censorship usually comes unexpectedly . . . .
3. Censorship is capricious and arbitrary, books and ideas and teaching methods used in one school being free from attack while another school in the same area will be hit for the same materials or ideas or methods. . . .
4. Censorship is a real threat, but too many English teachers regard it as they regard cancer, a type of it-can't-happen-to-me, only-the-other-guy syndrome. . . .
5. Censorship comes from within the school as well as from outside. . . . ("Censorship: the English Teacher, the English Department, and the State Affiliate," Georgia English Counselor, May 1971, p. 1.)

Who is this censor we have been referring to? We often talk about the mysterious "they" who say and do things contrary to our own positions. As Donelson noted above, the censor may well be someone within our own ranks--an administrator, a librarian, and another teacher. More to the point, we may be the censor at times. Morris Ernst and Alexander Lindey in their book, The Censor Marches On, write:

Every one of us exercises a personal censorship

> every day of his life. We decide to read one book, not another; we vow never to see another play by a certain dramatist; we fulminate against an editorial that clashes with our views. Our actions may depend on a number of factors: our upbringing, our education, our glandular make-up, our tastes, our prejudices, our mood. We may not be content to reserve our judgment to ourselves; we may try to persuade our children and our friends. (New York, 1940; p. 212.)

Robert Hogan of NCTE makes a very basic distinction between English teachers who censor in a selective manner rather than in a repressive one:

> When me make selections for classroom use or recommendations for library acquisitions we take several variables into account. We think about (1) the budget, the available funds; (2) the level of difficulty and/or sophistication of the materials ("Are they <u>right</u> for our students?); (3) the accuracy, the scholarly and professional respectability of the materials; (4) the narrowness of focus vs. the breadth of appeal; (5) the transactional relationship that obtains between our schools and the communities that support the schools. ("Some Thoughts on Censorship in the Schools," <u>Focus: Teaching English Language Arts</u>, Fall 1976, p. 3.)

Let me comment on his last point of the relationship between the school and the community. We must remember that the school, after all, is an extension of the community (there's that word

again!). I am always a bit disturbed by teachers and administrators who become too zealous in their professionalism to the total exclusion of parents and citizens in general who also have reasonable rights and expectations where schools and colleges are concerned. I make this comment as a parent, a citizen (this close to April 15 I prefer to avoid the term "taxpayer" out of mental anquish), and as an educator. The truth is that we need to cultivate this relationship for the betterment of both groups. In fact, on censorship matters, we must have a positive, healthy relationship, first, to avoid unfortunate conflicts and, second, to weather those that occur with broad community support.

Relative to the above, let me add that many questions about materials and ideas presented in our classrooms are not always from those wild-eyed extremists who have become the stereotypical tormentors of our professional nightmares. I have known bright, sensible people who have raised legitimate questions about a novel or a poem or a play, particularly in the high school. These people are usually willing to listen to a teacher's rationale for the study of a particular work or the viewing of a particular film, with the result that they come to understand and accept the teacher's position or work out some reasonable alternative. The last in my judgment isn't a cop-out or an unreasonable compromise.

What I am saying, then, is that teachers, too, may sometimes make a poor judgment in the selection and/or presentation of material for study. When questions arise, the key is being calm and rational throughout; emotionalism from any quarter

confounds reasonable solutions. Moreover, being prepared in advance for any potential censorship issue enhances survival. The following advice is gleaned from many whose experience in such matters far exceeds mine.

1. Agree in advance within your department what principles will guide you individually and collectively in the selection and presentation of material. This is especially important in your freshman and survey courses where the majority of your faculty is involved and where supplementary works are required or recommended reading.

2. Promote and maintain an ongoing dialog among the members of your department, sharing ideas and experiences on a wide spectrum of issues and concerns. Explore your personal philosophies with others; examine closely works that you find challenging, and don't overlook what your students are reading and viewing. Share, discuss, debate--too often English teachers get so caught up in their own private worlds that they fail to develop those rewarding and stimulating relationships within a faculty that strengthen it. A strong, unified faculty is much better prepared to cope with a censorship issue if its members get together frequently and talk openly and honestly.

3. An outgrowth of the preceding is to discuss in advance how a censorship case will be handled should it appear. There is a form for registering complaints which is endorsed jointly by NCTE and by the American Library Association. I have brought copies of that for those who may want to have one. Essentially, this form asks the complainant to specify what he is objecting

to in a book. It asks if he has read the entire work, if he is familiar with critical opinions about the work, and what work he would recommend in its place.

4. As I have indicated earlier, it is important to promote within the college community an understanding of and appreciation for academic freedom--definitely prior to a censorship crisis.

5. It is certainly desirable for English teachers to stay informed about censorship matters in the courts and on campuses across the country. For those who wish to read in more detail on the subject, I have prepared a selected bibliography on censorship which I invite you to take with you at the close of this session.

One aspect of being informed about censorship matters is an awareness of research being conducted in the area. I will spare you most of the details and share instead several observations drawn from seven studies reported in Rollin Douma's article, "Censorship in the English Classroom: A Review of Research." (Journal of Research and Development in Education, Spring 1976). These surveys were conducted between 1963 and 1975. In six of these where objectors are cited in descending order of frequency, parents head the list; teachers hold second place in three, students in two, and administrators in one. (The latter was a survey of 145 California junior college English teachers.) English department chairmen ranked third ahead of clergymen and librarians.

For all seven studies the kinds of objections are also

listed in descending order of frequency, with language being the major objection in five of the seven surveys. Literary value and morality were the other leading objections. Sex ranked second in four of the seven studies (p. 52).

Two additional findings in these studies reinforce the suggestions I made above. These studies revealed (1) that an overall low percentage of the schools had formalized any kind of standard procedure for resolving censorship questions, and (2) that an even lower percentage had adopted a policy for the selection of instructional materials (p. 61).

What are the prospects for literature selection in the future? I would like to be extremely optimistic; and if we as English teachers work actively to promote a climate of academic freedom that is mature and responsible, I think this is not unrealistic. There are two significant and interrelated factors, however, that we must be aware of and responsive to: One is a tendency among many high school and college students either to fail to discover the magic of literature and become active readers, or to let the "busy-ness" of their lives subvert reading habits. Another is the lure of the visual media, especially television, which for some contributes to a decline in reading. This is not intended as an attack on movies and television, for I see them as viable art forms capable of quality entertainment and enlightenment. I feel very strongly that as we strive to cultivate discriminating readers, so also should we strive to promote selective viewing.

We must remember that ours is a pluralistic society. This

plus the rise of what numerous critics are calling the "new realism" in literature suggest that we will be more open to instances of censorship in the future. Increased candidness in the areas of language and human sexuality mean that these will likely continue to head lists of objections.

And suddenly we are back to Larry Flynt and Hustler. Only tomorrow it may be Playboy or Oui or your favorite magazine, whatever it is. Here I wish to offer a modest proposal--a unit plan or mini-course or whatever you wish to call it to be plugged into any spot it might fit in your curriculum. Call it Censorship 99 or Academic Freedom 101 or even Subversive English 201 if you want to jolt your dean.

I suggest that any discussion of censorship issues and academic freedom begin with a careful look at the nature and function of language, for this is the key to the ultimate understanding of all ideas. Explore the semantic problems of definitions, and look carefully at the total communication process. Ultimately, you may work up to an examination with your students of some of these troublesome words we mentioned earlier: obscenity, pronography, etc.; though the waters should not be muddied unnecessarily as this should be an objective analysis of how language works.

There are several pieces of literature I recommend for study in connection with this mini-course. One is Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 (Ballentine Books). The title comes from the temperature at which paper burns, for this is a novel about the

future when firemen burn books to protect society against "conflicting theory and thought" and "the torrent of melancholy and dreary philosophy" (p. 56).

Another book for consideration is George Orwell's 1984 (like Fahrenheit 451, a sometimes banned book). After the Watergate experience this novel seems to me to be even more significant. I would also recommend reading Orwell's essay, "Shooting an Elephant," which examines the effect of mob pressure on a public official, ultimately forcing him to act in a way contrary to his best judgment.

There are at least two other pieces I recommend for careful reading and discussion. One is John Milton's classic protest against censorship, Areopagitica (1644). In Milton's words,

> . . . books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous dragon's teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men. And yet, on the other hand, unless wariness be used, as good almost kill a man as kill a good book; who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious

life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.

The other is the Earl of Chesterfield's speech to the House of Lords on June 1, 1737, on a bill to license dramatic performances. There are two passages which I find particularly pertinent:

> Every unnecessary Restraint on Licentiousness is a Fetter upon the Legs, is a Shackle upon the Hands of Liberty. One of the greatest Blessings we enjoy, one of the greatest Blessings a People, my Lords, can enjoy, is Liberty;---but every Good in the Life has its Allay of Evil:---Licentiousness is the Allay of Liberty; it is an Ebullition, and Excrescence;---it is a Speck upon the Eye of the Political Body, which I can never touch but with a gentle,---with a trembling Hand, lest I destroy the Body, lest I injure the Eye upon which it is apt to appear. . . .
>
> To prevent the acting of a Play which has any Tendency to Blasphemy, Immorality, Sedition, or private Scandal, can signify nothing, unless you can likewise prevent its being printed and published. On the contrary, if you prevent its being acted, and admit of its being printed and published, you will propagate the Mischief: Your Prohibition will prove a Bellows which will blow up the Fire you intend to extinguish. This Bill can therefore be of no Use for preventing either the publick

> or the private Injury intended by such a Play; and consequently can be of no manner of Use, unless it be designed as a Precedent, as a leading Step towards another, for subjecting the Press likewise to a Licenser. For such a wicked Purpose it may, indeed, be of great Use; and in that Light, it may most properly be called a Step towards arbitrary Power. . . .
>
> Let us consider, my Lords, that arbitrary power has seldom or never been introduced into any country at once. It must be introduced by slow degrees, and as it were step by step, lest the people should perceive its approach. The barriers and fences of the people's liberty must be plucked up one by one, and some plausible pretences must be found for removing or hood-winking, one after another, those sentries who are posted by the constitution of every free country for warning the people of their danger. When these preparatory Steps are once made, the People may then, indeed, with Regret see Slavery and arbitrary Power making long Strides over their Land, but it will then be too late to think of preventing or avoiding the impending Ruin. The Stage, my Lords, and the Press, are two of our Out-sentries; if we remove them,---if we hood-wink them,---if we throw them in Fetters,---the Enemy may surprize us. . . .

Once again, I raise the question: Dare we risk restricting personal liberties in order to convict the Larry Flynts in our society? As always, we must ask, if we support

and condone the censor, where will his license end? I leave you with the words of St. Jerome which Thomas Hardy invokes in his Explanatory Note to the First Edition of Tess of the D'Urbervilles: "If an offence come out of the truth, better is it that the offence come than the truth be concealed."

CITIZEN'S REQUEST FOR RECONSIDERATION OF A BOOK

Author Hardcover Paperback

Title Publisher (If known)

Request initiated by_____

Telephone_____ Address_____

City_____ Zone_____

Complainant represents
_____himself
_____(Name organization)_____
_____(Identify other group)_____

1. To what in the book do you object? (Please be specific; cite pages.)_____
_____
_____
_____

2. What do you feel might be the result of reading this book?_____
_____
_____

3. For what age group would you recommend this book?_____
_____

4. Is there anything good about this book?_____
_____
_____

5. Did you read the entire book?_____
What parts?_____

6. Are you aware of the judgment of this book by literary critics?_____
_____

7. What do you believe is the theme of this book?_____
_____

8. What would you like your school to do about this book?_____
_____do not assign it to my child
_____withdraw it from all students as well as my child
_____send it back to the English department office for reevaluation

9. In its place, what book of equal literary quality would you recommend that would convey as valuable a picture and perspective of our civilization?_____
_____

_____
Signature of Complainant

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